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ABSTRACT

Touch is an important and powerful form of communication that is often avoided for fear of negative interpretations. However, touch has also been associated with positive relational and educational outcomes. In this study, descriptions of touch that occurred between teachers and undergraduate students were elicited from students and then sorted using S. E. Jones' (1994) categories of touch. Additionally, the relational messages (J.K. Burgoon & J.L. Hale, 1987) and attitudes toward the teacher and course associated with the different types of touch were examined. Findings suggest that touch plays an important role in developing close professional relationships such as between teacher and student. Contains 21 references and 3 tables of data. (Author/RS)

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Communicating With Touch in the Teacher/Student Relationship

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Abstract

Touch is an important and powerful form of communication that is often avoided for fear of negative interpretations. However touch has also been associated with positive relational and educational outcomes. In this study, descriptions of touch that occurred between teachers and students were elicited from students and then sorted using Jones' (1994) categories of touch. Additionally, the relational messages (Burgoon & Hale, 1987) and attitudes toward the teacher and course associated with the different types of touch were examined.

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Communicating With Touch in the Teacher/Student Relationship

Touch is an important aspect of communication that can be used to communicate both positive messages (i.e., love and affection) as well as negative messages (i.e., anger). Both discussions with colleagues and research (Booth-Butterfield, 1989; Mongeau & Blalock, 1993) have identified confusion about using touch when interacting with students. Is it OK to touch students or is it something that should be avoided altogether? The primary goal of this research was to understand the relational consequences of teachers touching students.

Touch has been described as a powerful form of communication (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995). Touch is powerful because of the intensity of feelings that can be communicated with touch. It may be because of the power of touch that makes touch such a controversial form of communication. Touch has been associated with sexual harassment (Booth-Butterfield, 1989; Mongeau & Blalock, 1993). Touches interpreted as groping, grabbing, or that are forced, such as a forced hug or kiss are considered to be sexually harassing. However touch has also been associated with positive relational outcomes such as immediacy (Mehrabian, 1981, 1971). Immediacy is defined as perceived physical and/or psychological closeness (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987) and is considered a distinct theme or characteristic of relational communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Additionally, touch is considered to be crucial for normal human development (Harlow, 1971; Montagu, 1995), with a lack of touch being associated with both a decline in physical and psychological functioning. With touch being associated with both positive and negative outcomes, it is easy to become confused about how to conduct oneself in certain situations. In business and educational settings, individuals are often directed to "not touch each other" in order to avoid the appearance of sexual harassment. But is this really good advice?

Although most interactions can be carried out successfully without touch occurring, many interactions may be more successful when touch is used. Steward and Lupfer (1987) conducted an experiment where students met with their instructor to discuss their performance on an exam and their general progress in the course. Half of the students were touched twice on the arm by the instructor during the conference. Those students who were touched by the instructor rated their instructor as friendlier, more understanding, interesting, and capable than did those students who were not touched during the conference. More importantly, those students who were touched by their instructors performed significantly better on the next exam than did those students who were not touched. The results of this study clearly indicate that touch may help teachers achieve their classroom goal of facilitating learning. This study is consistent with research on immediacy. Although touch is only one component of immediacy, immediacy has consistently been associated with positive outcomes such as affective learning (Anderson, 1979; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Richmond, et al., 1987), cognitive learning (Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995; Kelly & Gorham, 1987), and motivation to study (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994, 1993). Touch that enhances immediacy would be expected to have positive effects on students' learning and motivation in the classroom. While touch can certainly have negative consequences such as sexual harassment, touch can also have some very beneficial outcomes.

Although there has been a good deal of research conducted on touch (Burgoon, 1991; Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984; Burgoon & Walther, 1990; Burgoon, Walther, & Baesler, 1992; Jones & Yarbrough, 1985; Jourard & Rubin, 1968; Montagu, 1986; Rosenfeld, Kartus, & Ray, 1976), there is still a great deal about touch that is not understood. One issue that complicates the study of touch is that touch does not occur in a vacuum. Touch is a form of communication that is used in conjunction with other

forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. For instance, Burgoon and Walther (1990) found that a touch to the face was interpreted differently depending on the attractiveness of the communicator. Although some touches do have a fairly stable meaning (i.e., a handshake) (Burgoon & Walther, 1990), the meaning conveyed by most touches varies depending on the context, relationship, topic of conversation, and other nonverbal behaviors accompanying the touch.

To explore the meanings communicated by touch, Jones and Yarbrough (1985) looked at the touches that accompanied different types of meaning. Using participant observers, Jones & Yarbrough collected information on 1500 touches, and identified 18 categories of meaning. These categories were: support, appreciation, inclusion (later called togetherness by Jones, 1994), sexual, affection, playful affection, playful aggression, compliance, attention-getting, announcing a response, greeting, departure, greeting/affection, departure/affection, reference to appearance, instrumental ancillary (later call incidental by Jones, 1994), instrumental intrinsic, and accidental. Jones and Yarbrough were able to identify key features of touches that conveyed each meaning, but one clear result was that a variety of touches could be used to communicate each type of meaning.

Jones (1994) slightly modified the above typology of meanings, identifying eight categories of touch meanings. These categories are: Positive Touches which includes support, appreciation, togetherness, and affection; Sexual Touches which includes this type only; Playful Touches which includes playful affection and playful aggression; Control Touches which includes compliance, attention-getting, and announcing-a-response; Ritual Touches which includes simple greeting and simple departure; Hybrid Touches which includes greeting with affection and departure with affection; Task-Related Touches which includes reference-to-appearance, incidental, and instrumental, and Accidental Touches which includes this type only.

While some of the Jones' touch categories have a positive connotation, it is clear that both pleasant and unpleasant touches could occur in each category. For instance sexual touches could be interpreted very positively or as sexual harassment. The same is true for task related touches. Taking hold of another's arm to help them could be interpreted positively (the help is appreciated), or negatively (the help is perceived as condescending).

A question driving the present research is, "What is the difference between positive and negative touch between teachers and students?" While it would be nice and simple if we could identify specific touches that were "good" and others that were "bad," the nature of the interpretation of touch, as demonstrated by Jones and Yarbrough, is not so simple. Although simple prescriptions are unrealistic, it is realistic to expect postive and negative touches to be of different types. Jones' (1994) typology of touch is a useful and meaningful framework for differentiating positive from negative touches. This led to our first two research questions:

RQ1: What type touches occur between students and teachers?

RQ2: What type of touches were reported as pleasant and what type of touches were reported as unpleasant?

A second question driving the present research is "What is the impact of touch on the student-teacher relationship?" One way of addressing this question is to explore the relational message interpretation associated with different types of touch. Another way of addressing this question is to explore the relationship between the types of touch and affective learning. This led us to our last two research questions:

RQ3: How did different types of touches impact the relational message interpreted from the touch?

RQ4: How did different types of touches impact participants' attitude toward their

instructors and toward the course content (affective learning)?

METHOD

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Half of the participants were asked to recall and describe an interaction between themselves and a teacher that involved touch and was unpleasant and uncomfortable. The other half of the participants were asked to recall and describe a pleasant and comfortable interaction with a teacher that involved touch. Examples of touches (shaking hands, hugging, pat on the back, brushing up against, slapping, etc.) were listed to prime participants' memories. Participants were asked to do the following when describing the interaction: 1) describe the context within which the touch occurred; 2) describe how and why the touch occurred; 3) describe how they reacted to the touch; and 4) describe the impact this interaction had on their relationship with their instructor (if any). After providing a written description of the interaction, participants were asked a variety of questions about the interaction and asked to complete additional scales which will be described below.[1] Participants who were unable to recall an interaction that involved touch were asked to complete the two affective learning scales, but not the other scales. Most students were able to recall an interaction involving touch (78%), while only 22% were unable to recall such an interaction.

Participants

Participants consisted of 232 (127 female, 103 male, and 2 unidentified) undergraduate students enrolled in one of two introductory communication courses at a medium sized Midwestern university. Participants reported on 128 male and 55 female (49 unidentified) teachers. The average age of participants when the interaction on which they were reporting took place was 17.27. The average age of participants at the time of the study was 20 years. There were 180 participants who recalled and described a touch. Data analysis was limited to these participants.

Measurement

Relational Communication Scale. Burgoon and Hale's (1987) Relational Communication Scale was used to assess participants' perceptions of the interaction involving touch. The 40-item version of Relational Communication Scale, using a 5-point Likert-type scale, was chosen for this study. This version of the Relational Communication Scale consists of eight dimensions: immediacy-affection, similarity-depth, receptivity-trust, composure, formality, dominance, equality, and task-social. Burgoon and Hale (1987) report reliabilities for each dimension ranging from .52 (equality) to .81 (immediacy-affection). See Table 1 for scale means, standard deviations, and reliabilities in the present study.

insert Table 1 about here

Affective Learning. Two subscales from Gorham's (1988) Affective Learning Scale were used. Gorham's Affective Learning Scale consists of six subscales asking students about their (a) attitude toward course content, course recommended behaviors, and course instructor, and (b) behavioral intent to engage in behaviors recommended in the course, enroll in another course of related content, and take another class with the same instructor. The two subscales used in this study were students' attitude toward course content and toward the course instructor. These two dimensions of affective learning were measured using a 7 point semantic differential scale with the adjectives good/bad, worthless/valuable, fair/unfair, and positive/negative. Previous reliabilities for the Affective Learning Scale and sub-scales have ranged from .96-.98. See Table 1 for the means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for these measures in the present study.

RESULTS

To address the first research question regarding the types of touches that occur between teachers and students, content analysis was used. Participants' descriptions of the interactions involving touch

between themselves and a teacher were transcribed and placed on separate cards. Jones' (1994) categories of touch were used for sorting the descriptions and determining what types of touches occurred between teachers and students. Two independent coders read each description and first determined which of the eighteen types of touch the description best fit. The descriptions were then combined into the broader categories of touch identified by Jones (1994). Intercoder agreement for the eight categories using Cohen's (1960) coefficient of agreement was .68. Most disagreements occurred between the positive touch category and the task-related category. This was largely due to the vagueness and incomplete nature of many of the participant descriptions. The two coders reviewed and reached agreement on each description for final categorization. See Table 2 for the number of touches that occurred in each category.

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insert Table 2 about here

As is shown in Table 2, most touches fell into the category of positive touches (78 touches). Jones (1994) defines positive touches as communicating support, appreciation, togetherness, or affection. Most of the descriptions could be classified as either affection or support, and none were classified as togetherness. A typical example of a supportive touch described by a participant is as follows:

> I was in class after school sitting at my desk, asking my teacher (a male) to help me with some problems (concerning the class). As he was helping me he put his hand on my shoulder and after I shook his hand in thanks. I didn't think anything of it. If anything it seemed that he was concerned and cared that I was doing well in his class. None - we remained friends and a teacher/student relationship.

Touches identified as affection included a variety of touches and contexts. Touches that were thought to express liking , but were not specifically providing support or showing appreciation were considered as

communicating affection. There were several descriptions of students being congratulated by a teacher for some achievement, and these examples were determined to best fit the affection category. A typical example of this type of touch is as follows:

> I was at an awards ceremony as a senior in high school being honored for my achievement in music. After I received a major award my band director hugged me, congratulated me, and patted me on the back. I didn't mind this because I knew they were proud of me. The only impact it would have had on me is that I knew they were sincere in what they were complimenting me about. I felt good because they knew I worked hard.

The second largest category of touches was hybrid touches. These touches involve greetings and departures with affection. More than a simple handshake is involved in these interactions. These touches typically involved some form of hugging and the participant described the interaction as warm.

Task-related touches were the third largest category with 24 touches. Jones (1994) defines this category of consisting of incidental, instrumental, and reference to appearance touches. The coders did not identify any of the descriptions as representing reference to appearance. Touches were evenly split between incidental and instrumental. Incidental touches occur as an unnecessary part of performing a task. A typical example of an incidental touch is as follows:

> One of my math teachers liked to rub my back. He would do this in class when he would be checking on the classes' work. At first, I thought it was really weird but then I noticed that he did it to everyone, even the guys, so it didn't make me as uncomfortable. It didn't really have an impact except for the fact that I thought he was a "touchy" kind of guy.

An instrumental touch is defined as a touch that occurs in accomplishing a task (Jones, 1994). An example of an instrumental touch is as follows:

My physical therapy class instructor (opposite sex) used my body to demonstrate several physical therapy motions.

A few touches also fell into the categories of sexual and playful touch (three and four respectively). These types of touches appear to be the exception in teacher student interactions. These touches were excluded in the analyses performed to address research questions two, three, and four. Also to facilitate analyses, the ritual touch and hybrid touch categories were combined. These two categories were combined because of their similarity (all touches involved greetings or departures) and to create a larger sample size for this cell for statistical analyses. This resulted in four categories of touch: positive touches, control touches, ritual/hybrid touches, and task-related touches. (No touches were categorized as accidental, therefore this category was not used.) There were 149 descriptions of touches that were coded and used in the following analyses.

To address the second research question, the frequency of touches elicited as pleasant and unpleasant in each category of touch were examined. As indicated above, participants were asked to think of either a pleasant and comfortable touch or an unpleasant and uncomfortable touch. Of the 78 positive touches, 51 were from participants in the pleasant group and 27 from participants in the unpleasant group.[2] Of the 12 control touches, 10 were from participants in the unpleasant group and 2 were from the pleasant group. Of the 35 ritual/hybrid touches, 24 were from the pleasant group and 11 from the unpleasant group. Among the 24 task-related touches, 11 were from the pleasant group and 13 were from the unpleasant group. Of the 149 descriptions, 88 were elicited from participants in the pleasant group and 61 from participants in the unpleasant group.

As expected, most positive touches were elicited from participants describing a pleasant touch. One might expect virtually all of these touches to be considered pleasant, however some touches were

clearly intended to be positive, but were interpreted negatively by the student. An example of such a touch is illustrated by the following description.

> At an awards assembly, I was receiving the award. Teacher was very happy for me and hugged me. Didn't like it because of where we were. Didn't affect relationship after that day.

It appears that the student recognized the positive intent of the teacher's touch, but was uncomfortable with the touch because of personal preferences.

Touches in the ritual/hybrid category were also mostly considered pleasant. These touches frequently involved students and teachers who had developed a close relationship and who were either glad to see each other or sorry to see the other person leaving.

As expected, control touches were almost all considered unpleasant. Having one's behavior directed and controlled is rarely a pleasant experience. Task-related touches were quite evenly distributed between the pleasant and unpleasant groups. This is not surprising. Task-related touches involve touches that are necessary to completing a task. A student may feel closer to his/her instructor as a result of such a touch, or feel resentful of being touched. This may be a result of the student's feelings toward the instructor prior to the touch.

The third research question asks how the different types of touches impact the relational message interpreted from the touch. Analysis of variance was used to respond to this question, with the categories of touch serving as the independent variable and each of the eight relational messages serving as dependent variables. Significant differences among the categories of touch were found for the immediacy-affection relational message [$F(3/140) = 10.90$, $p < .01$]. See Table 3 for group means. Participants perceived less immediacy-affection in control touches than in positive, ritual/hybrid, or task-social touches. Significant differences were also found for receptivity-trust [$F(3/140) = 18.44$, $p < .01$]. Again, control touches were perceived to have less receptivity and trust than positive touches, ritual/hybrid touches, and task-social

touches. A similar pattern was found for similarity-depth [$F(3/142) = 18.80$, $p < .01$], with control touches being perceived as having less similarity and depth than the other three types of touches. Significant differences were also found among the touch categories for composure [$F(3/142) = 13.45$, $p < .01$]. Again, control touches were perceived as being less composed than the other categories of touch. Significant differences for formality were found [$F(3/143) = 10.69$, $p < .01$], but in the opposite pattern. Control touches were perceived to have significantly greater formality than positive, ritual/hybrid, or task-social touches. Dominance had a pattern similar to formality. Significant differences were found for dominance [$F(3/137) = 5.59$, $p < .01$], with control touches being perceived as being greater in dominance than the other categories of touch. Significant differences were found for equality [$F(3/142) = 15.73$, $p < .01$], with control touches being perceived as having less equality than the other three categories of touch. Significant differences were also found for task-social relational message, but in a pattern different from the other relational messages [$F(3/139) = 8.30$, $p < .01$]. Ritual/hybrid touches were perceived as being less task oriented (more social) than positive, control, or task-related touches.

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insert Table 3 about here

The fourth research question was concerned with participants' attitudes toward the instructor on which they were reporting and the course they had with that instructor. Significant differences among the categories of touch were found for participants' attitude toward the teacher [$F(3/145) = 4.94$, $p < .05$]. Participants' who described ritual/hybrid touches reported having a more positive attitude toward their teacher than participants describing either a positive touch or a control touch. Analysis of variance indicated no significant differences among the four categories of touch in regards to participants' attitude

toward the course content. See Table 3 for the means associated with all analysis of variance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that a variety of touches occur between teachers and students. Most of these touches were intended to be positive in nature, and very few touches were used to communicate control. It also appears that teachers frequently touch students as a form of greeting and/or departure. There were several descriptions of touch occurring between a teacher and student where a friendship-like relationship had developed, making it normal in either a greeting or a departure to complement the verbal message with some form of touch.

Each category of touch was also represented by both pleasant and unpleasant touches. While this was expected and fits Jones and Yarbrough's (1985) typology of touches, it is not very comforting to those of us faced with the dilemma of whether to withhold touch or not when interacting with students. It appears from this research, that even when students recognize the positive intention of the teacher in using touch, students may still interpret the touch negatively. Control touches were the only category that was not well represented by both pleasant and unpleasant touches. However, the number of interactions that were classified as control was very small, so this may not be a very meaningful finding.

As was expected, the category of touch influenced the relational message formed in the interaction. Control touches consistently had more negative relational messages associated with them. The combined category of ritual/hybrid touches was consistently associated with more positive relational messages. The touch involved in greetings and departures (which makes up the ritual/hybrid category), is most likely mutually negotiated. It makes sense that touch that is mutually negotiated would be perceived more positively. We are more likely to interpret something positively if we are involved in initiating it. Other categories of touch involve more instances of touch that are initiated by the teacher,

rather than mutually negotiated. Additionally, over half of the touches in this category were identified as pleasant and comfortable touches by participants.

Positive touches and task-related touches tended to be perceived very similarly in terms of relational messages. Touches in both of these categories were evenly split between the pleasant and unpleasant groups. Examination of the means in Table 3 shows that for the most part, the relational messages associated with these touches were quite positive.

In regard to the impact touch had on students' attitude toward their teachers and toward the course, all types of touch resulted in fairly positive attitudes. There were no significant differences in attitude toward the course among the four types of touch. The only significant difference for attitude toward the teacher was between positive touches and ritual/hybrid touches. Examination of Table 3 shows that all of the means for teacher/course attitude were above the mid-point of 4 on the scale. Even control touches resulted in an overall positive attitude toward the instructor and toward the course. Although we do not have a control group with which to compare, these results indicate that teachers touching students result in fairly positive student responses.

As stated early in this paper, touch is a powerful form of communication. The message communicated through touch can certainly be a powerful negative message, but it can also be powerfully positive. Most people recognize the important role touch plays in the development of close friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. Based on the present research, it appears that touch also plays an important role in developing close professional relationships such as between teacher and student. Although this research did not examine other types of professional relationships (e.g., doctor-patient, superior-subordinate), touch is likely an important component in the development of close working relationships in other contexts as well.

Notes

[1]Data collected, but not reported here include: touch apprehension, touch avoidance, body part touched, duration, movement, and pressure of touch, eye contact and body positioning accompanying the touch, reaction to touch, and labeling of the touch.

[2]Some students appeared to disregard the directions and described a pleasant touch when asked to describe an unpleasant touch.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Scales

	Mean	SD	Reliability
Immediacy-Affection	3.69	.56	.78
Receptivity-Trust	3.86	.69	.82
Similarity-Depth	3.34	.72	.74
Composure	4.07	..65	.81
Formality	2.11	.77	.68
Dominance	2.70	.64	.63
Equality	3.62	.80	.73
Task-Social	3.22	.80	.73
Attitude toward Teacher	5.63	1.48	.93
Attitude toward Course	5.78	1.25	.91

Table 2

Categorization of Touch Descriptions

Positive Touches	78
Sexual Touches	3
Playful Touches	4
Control Touches	12
Ritual Touches	9
Hybrid Touches	26
Task-Related Touches	24
Accidental Touches	0
Unusable Descriptions	24

Table 3

Relational Message and Teacher/Course Attitude Means for Categories of Touch

	Positive Touches	*Control Touches*	*Ritual/Hybrid Touches*	*Task-Related Touches*
Imm-Aff	3.66a (.49)	2.87ab (.72)	3.96ac (.60)	3.66bc (.52)
Rec-Trust	3.88a (.58)	2.70ab (1.10)	4.12a (.47)	3.98b (.54)
Sim-Depth	3.32a (.57)	2.08ab (.85)	3.65ac (.62)	3.29bc (.67)
Composure	4.11a (.51)	3.15abc (.94)	4.29b (.57)	4.28c (.46)
Formality	2.11a (.70)	3.14abc (1.08)	1.86b (.60)	1.86c (.69)
Dominance	2.70a (.63)	3.15ab (.66)	2.33ac (.58)	2.69bc (.59)
Equality	3.62a (.75)	2.31abc (1.29)	3.92b (.56)	3.93c (.56)
Task-Social*	3.29a (.67)	3.67b (1.06)	2.78ab (.70)	3.68a (.80)
Teacher Att.	5.53a (1.60)	4.75 (1.99)	6.44a (.92)	5.72 (1.36)
Course Att.	5.66a (1.39)	5.69b (1.47)	6.27ab (.89)	5.86 (1.18)

Numbers inside parentheses are standard deviations.
Means that share the same subscript are significantly different, $p < .05$.
*A higher score indicates a more task-related relational message, and a lower score indicates a more social relational message.